

# POLICY BRIEF



EVIDENCE, PRACTICES  
AND ADVICE TO  
SHAPE POLICIES

ISSUE 01: MAY 2022

# MICRO-CREDENTIALS ARE TAKING OFF:

## HOW IMPORTANT ARE THEY FOR MAKING LIFELONG LEARNING A REALITY?



What are micro-credentials?  
Why are micro-credentials important?  
How can micro-credentials interact with other tools in education and training?  
What are the implications of their uptake for lifelong learning policies?

## Why focus on micro-credentials?

Micro-credentials are an emerging phenomenon all over the world. They are seen as instrumental in supporting upskilling and reskilling in response to transformations in labour markets. New technologies and the green and digital transition are changing skills demand<sup>1</sup>, and for such a transition, people will need to keep up-to-date and ensure their training is more adapted to individual needs.

Training courses are increasingly becoming shorter and more targeted. They may be offered by a variety of providers, including providers outside the formal education system. How do we ensure that the results of such short training courses are portable, that all learning achievements can be recognised to allow learners to mix and match their school and work experiences and to move flexibly between different sectors of education? Micro-credentials can be part of the solution.

### Box1. The ETF survey on micro-credentials

In May-June 2021, the ETF conducted a survey that explored the views of different actors and stakeholders in education and training and the labour market on the subject of micro-credentials. It focused mainly on EU neighbouring countries. We received 499 responses from 60 countries all over the world, which gave us a global snapshot of views on micro-credentials.

Through a questionnaire, respondents were asked to share their views on what micro-credentials are, why they are important, and how they can make a difference and be linked to existing quality assurance and recognition mechanisms. The respondents were formal and non-formal education and training providers, national authorities and agencies, as well as labour market stakeholders.

The aim of the survey was to identify what support is needed to boost a micro-credential approach and to collect examples of existing micro-credentials and opinions on the implications of their uptake and use. Based on the responses, the survey findings support the definition of micro-credentials as a shared tool, alongside other lifelong learning instruments.

## Are micro-credentials NEW?

The survey participants did not see micro-credentials as a new phenomenon. They are mostly associated with existing credentials that certify:

- a short learning experience (upskilling and reskilling short courses, both in formal and non-formal settings, parts of formal education programmes);
- a demonstrated competence (professional certificates, certificates of competence

awarded by professional or other authorised bodies, awards certifying validation of non-formal and informal learning).

This dual-faceted vision of micro-credentials is supported by the respondents' views on their most important features: micro-credentials reflect both an individual learning experience and the result of an assessment of knowledge, skills and competences. The other key feature

<sup>1</sup> [Changing skills for a changing world: Understanding skills demand in EU neighbouring countries | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

of micro-credentials is their relationship to existing qualifications; they should articulate with a recognised qualification or part of a recognised qualification so that learners and employers are able to see a path from micro-credentials to qualifications.

This underlines the importance of assessment in designing micro-credentials, and the importance of their interaction with traditional qualifications and focus on specific skills and competences (Box 2).

### Box 2. What credentials are not micro-credentials?

We asked respondents which credentials cannot be considered as micro-credentials. The answers show that a credential is not considered as micro-credential if it:

- does not include an assessment of skills or competences – there is no micro-credential without an assessment;
- is a full formal education qualification (macro-credential) – micro-credentials should be smaller than a qualification;
- has no stand-alone value – micro-credentials should be meaningful units, meaningful either in the labour market or in that they add value to formal education qualifications;
- is not subject to a quality assurance process (or not awarded by a recognised body);
- does not represent a small volume of learning outcomes; micro-credentials represent a learning achievement which corresponds to a short period of learning.

## Why are micro-credentials important?

Micro-credentials are important for stakeholders primarily because they can be used to address a specific work need and can

also be used to recognise learning outcomes acquired outside formal education.

### Box 3. Benefits of micro-credentials

The survey identified the following benefits of micro-credentials.

- Micro-credentials have immediate relevance to labour market demand (linked to specific skills/competences; address a specific work need; responsive to changes in the labour market; enable quick access to work; bridge the gap between formal education qualifications and specific industry or workplace requirements).
- Micro-credentials support individual learning (focused on specific learner needs; learners can progress at their own pace; an easy way of accumulating learning in small pieces; stackable towards a qualification; facilitate access to formal education).
- Micro-credentials have stand-alone value (a micro-credential is a meaningful part of a qualification or a complementary/supplementary award that can have a meaning in the labour market; add value to a formal education qualification).
- Micro-credentials facilitate recognition of an individual's skills, knowledge and competences (facilitate the formalisation and portability of an individual's skills and competences; improve the visibility of lifelong learning; facilitate recognition of learning achievements acquired outside formal education; allow recognition of mastery or a more advanced skill level in a given area; digital visibility).
- Micro-credentials facilitate the design of flexible training (less efforts needed to design; allow one to learn on demand, as and when needed).
- Micro-credentials are cost and time saving (short duration of learning; affordable for those paying for themselves).

## Shaping the concept of micro-credentials

Defining a common concept or approach to micro-credentials is crucial in order to support their implementation as a shared tool. To date, the European Commission and UNESCO have developed proposals on defining micro-credentials (Boxes 4 and 5). Likewise, the ETF survey results highlight the key characteristics of micro-credentials, listed below.

### Skill or competence focused

The demand side of micro-credentials is important. Micro-credentials should focus on competences and skills that address current specific needs of a learner or an employer.

### Standards-based assessment

Micro-credentials recognise the achievement of learning outcomes related to a specific skill or competence. Micro-credentials thus represent the skill or competence standards used for assessing an individual's learning achievements.

### Quality

Organisations that award micro-credentials are responsible for developing skill/competence standards, and they have a responsibility to ensure that the assessment of an individual's learning achievements meets these standards. These competence standards may need to be validated by external bodies (e.g. industry partners, a quality assurance agency).

### Stackability

Micro-credentials may represent not only a discrete skill or competence, but also a combination of skills or competences. Stacked together in a coherent way, micro-credentials can form a substantial award on their own or can be aggregated towards a qualification.

#### Box 4. European approach to micro-credentials (2021)

The proposal for a Council recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials (2021)<sup>2</sup> calls for the use of micro-credentials due to their potential in assisting lifelong learning and employability, and suggests making the most of existing tools to develop them. It proposes 10 principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials. In particular, the proposal underlines the importance of assessment in defining micro-credentials, as well as quality, stackability and relevance<sup>3</sup>.

#### Box 5. UNESCO proposal on global definition of micro-credentials (2021)<sup>4</sup>

A micro-credential:

- is a record of focused learning achievement, verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do;
- includes an assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider;
- has stand-alone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning;
- meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.

<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0770>

<sup>3</sup> ANNEX II to the proposal, Union principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials:

<https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/annex%20to%20the%20proposal%20on%20micro-credentials.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Oliver, B. (2021, September). A conversation starter: Towards a common definition of micro-credentials. Paris, UNESCO [https://www.edubrief.com.au/uploads/4/5/0/5/45053363/draft\\_unesco\\_report\\_microcredentials\\_13\\_sept\\_21.pdf](https://www.edubrief.com.au/uploads/4/5/0/5/45053363/draft_unesco_report_microcredentials_13_sept_21.pdf)

Much emphasis has been placed on introducing micro-credentials in higher education<sup>5</sup> Much less is known about micro-credentials in VET and adult learning.

The two examples below from partner countries<sup>6</sup> largely comply with the key characteristics of micro-credentials (although the term ‘micro-credentials’ is not yet used by the national providers).

### Box 6. Micro-credentials in VET<sup>7</sup>

#### Georgia

Short vocational training and retraining programmes in Georgia provide training in specific tasks related to occupations or professional activities. They can be offered by any legal entity, including those outside the formal education system, such as private companies, training centres and associations. To obtain the right to issue a state-recognised certificate, the provider must be authorised and the programme must meet some specific requirements: learning outcomes should comply with NQF levels 2-5; the programme should be based either on occupational or VET standards, or modules from authorised VET programmes, or the relevant legal requirements regulating professional activity, or documents containing information on occupations, such as the ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) standard or national classifications. Education institutions can provide vocational training and retraining programmes based on authorised VET programmes without additional authorisation. Training and retraining programmes and authorised providers must be registered electronically in the system and published on [www.vet.emis.ge](http://www.vet.emis.ge).

### Box 7. Micro-credentials and VNFIL<sup>8</sup>

#### Ukraine

The national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning for blue-collar occupations offers the possibility to certify separate skills or professional competences related to job tasks. Assessment criteria are developed by assessment centres based on occupational standards. The certificates awarded may be recognised both in order to continue formal education and training and in the labour market. The State Employment Service’s VET centres may offer supplementary training that leads to a qualification.

## How do micro-credentials Interact with other tools?

### Micro-credentials and credit systems

Mainly in the higher education field, micro-credentials may carry credits provided they fit units of formal education programmes. In VET, micro-credentials have not been associated with credits, mainly because there are no credit systems for VET in most of the ETF partner countries. Micro-credentials can benefit from the use of the European credit system for VET

(ECVET), which focuses on developing units of learning outcomes.

### Validation and micro-credentials

Most stakeholders link micro-credentials with the assessment of prior learning. They can be issued to recognise learning experiences that are smaller than a regular qualification and make them visible, allowing for certification of a

<sup>5</sup> [A European approach to micro-credentials – Output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group – Final report. December 2020](#)

<sup>6</sup> Based on the survey feedback

<sup>7</sup> As described in the NQF fiche: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Georgia.pdf> [Qualifications | ETF \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> As described in [Overview of independent assessment practices in Ukraine](#) [ETF bridging support to Ukraine's vocational education and training system and qualifications system in 2016-2019 | Open Space \(europa.eu\)](#)

small or very small set of skills and facilitating upskilling pathways.

### Inclusion into NQF

Micro-credentials are not limited to a particular NQF level or sector of education and training. Where the inclusion of micro-credentials in the NQF is accepted (for example, in the UK), they can be allocated at any level. In most partner countries, micro-credentials are not yet part of the NQF.

### Quality assurance

Quality assurance of micro-credentials is seen either under existing institutional or programme accreditation arrangements (VET and higher education institutions) or as part of the certification and assessment process (national authorities and agencies, labour market

stakeholders and non-formal education and training providers).

Other forms of quality assurance include quality assurance linked to the NQF<sup>9</sup> or to labour market regulation, with the professional bodies and companies which issue the micro-credentials being responsible for their quality assurance, using their own specific criteria.

### Recognition of micro-credentials

Quality assurance and the relationship with a qualification are seen as essential for the recognition of micro-credentials. According to our survey, countries are looking at getting micro-credentials recognised through credit recognition and accumulation schemes, so that they count towards a qualification, or through their inclusion into the NQF, where possible.

## Conclusions: implications for lifelong learning policies

### How can micro-credentials add value in education, training and qualifications systems?

Micro-credentials are seen as beneficial in promoting lifelong learning opportunities. They are a tool for both a more tailored and flexible learning provision and for step-by-step skills assessments and certification.

Micro-credentials can strengthen the design of qualifications and educational programmes that are divided into self-standing units of assessment and flexible modules which can be shared across qualifications and courses. Micro-credentials can create additional opportunities for individual learning achievements obtained in different contexts to be recognised and can facilitate recognition of prior learning.

Micro-credentials can be a tool to bring short courses and credentials into the qualification system. The link with validation and demonstrating competences is a key element. Building on existing validation and quality assurance arrangements will help to integrate micro-credentials and courses leading to micro-credentials into qualification systems.

Micro-credentials support flexibility and opportunities for progression. The use of micro-credentials can bridge the gap between traditional qualifications and flexible learning pathways. Micro-credentials are mostly perceived as related to further education and adult learning. However, an opportunity also lies in linking them to qualifications in order to enhance initial employment and upskilling pathways for young people, and to provide additional learning opportunities for vulnerable groups and those who have dropped out of formal education.

Micro-credentials can contribute to the adaptation of education and training to labour market changes. Micro-credentialing pathways serve as a route for just-in-time learning and performance support arising from evolving job requirements or priority needs. Micro-credentials can be used to address emerging needs for new skills and competences in the labour market and help to accelerate their integration into existing or new qualifications and training programmes.

<sup>9</sup> See Quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) [EUR-Lex - 32017H0615\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

## How to stimulate the use of micro-credentials?

1. **The European principles for micro-credentials** are universal and not system-specific. Making best use of the European Union principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials<sup>10</sup> is a **good starting point for the implementation of micro-credentials**. Micro-credentials are a new concept, but not a new phenomenon. Stakeholders may adopt micro-credentials as a new way of understanding current practice. There is a need to invest in **raising awareness and promoting common understanding** of the use of micro-credentials. Work on the **translation and internalisation of the concept** in national and local contexts also needs to be done.
2. **The regulatory frameworks** for the uptake and use of micro-credentials should be **enabling** and avoid prescribing and overregulating micro-credentials, as this may cause them to lose their flexibility. The **right balance of quality assurance** to enable the development and implementation of micro-credentials and their recognition by others should **build on the experience** of producing small sets of skills, units of learning and modularisation in education and training programmes rather than a priori regulation.
3. Micro-credentials need to be **relevant for individuals** supporting upskilling and reskilling and allowing for **combining validation with training opportunities** to build more flexible pathways. Maximising **synergies with other policy areas** – skills intelligence, active labour market policies, validation of non-formal and informal learning, upskilling pathways – with a view to promoting the use of micro-credentials and a **stronger focus on inclusion**, adult learning and lifelong learning can improve their effectiveness.
4. **New partnerships and collaborations** between formal and non-formal education and training providers, national authorities and agencies and labour market stakeholders can ensure the **relevance** of micro-credentials **for the labour market**. There should be a **special focus on supporting innovative sectors**, including those linked to sustainability and the digital transition.
5. In order to make micro-credentials **more stackable**, it is important to connect them and allow them to be compared. This can be done **by developing digital systems** for skills, qualifications and credentials that **make the best use of existing European transparency tools** such as qualification and competency frameworks, ECTS, Europass and ESCO.
6. Micro-credentials can make qualification systems more responsive to the needs of individuals and to dynamic and increasingly globalised labour markets. Recognising their value and integrating them in qualification systems will increase mutual trust, recognition and the portability of competencies and individual qualifications. This requires an **exchange of international experiences** and **close cooperation between countries and public and private international initiatives** involving micro-credentials.

<sup>10</sup> Annex II to [Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, 2021](#)

## Key References

- European Commission (2021). [Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#)
- European Commission (2021). [Staff Working Document accompanying the proposal on Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#)
- European Commission (2021). [Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts](#)
- European Commission (2020). European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience [European Skills Agenda - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)
- European Commission (2020). [The Council Recommendation on vocational education and training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#)
- European Commission (2020). [Commission Staff Working Document: Evaluation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning.](#)
- European Commission (2016). [Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults.](#)

## Useful links

- [A European approach to micro-credentials | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)
- [Micro-credentials - EDUBRIEF: EduBrief publications and resources on micro-credentials](#)
- [Conference on micro-credentials | CEDEFOP \(europa.eu\)](#)
- [MicroHE – Supporting Learning Excellence through Micro-Credentials in Higher Education \(microcredentials.eu\)](#)
- [Micro-credentials » NZQA](#)

For further information on our activities, please contact:

 [info@etf.europa.eu](mailto:info@etf.europa.eu)

 +39 011 6302222

 +39 011 6302200